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ABSTRACT

This document brings together four invited papers by external students who have graduated from Riverina College: (1) "The External Student: One Profile" (Christine Del Gigante); (2) "Managing Life as a External Student" (Robert Landow); (3) "The Computerised Student" (John Chant); and (4) "The Right to Study" (Coral Davidson). Topics covered include problems relating to tiredness, social life, and textbooks; overcoming these and other obstacles; support from colleagues and family; successful management techniques for external students; and the motivations of external students. The papers from students with varied interests and backgrounds, together with editor's commentary, offer an overview of life as an external student. (MES)

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THE EXPERIENCE OF EXTERNAL STUDIES

by Graduates of Riverina College

Division of External Studies
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Foreword

A College is essentially a bringing together of people in a study situation, a meeting of the minds of students with those of writers and teachers. A course of study is a period of commitment on the part of students to set aside a part of their lives for this purpose. For the external student the meeting of minds takes place at a distance, in physical isolation for most of the time. The commitment to study means sacrificing other activities, and calls for special support from family and friends and college staff.

This present pamphlet is a natural complement to the second occasional paper **Action in External Studies**, which contained four papers by staff of Riverina College on some aspects of their work. It brings together four invited papers by people who have graduated from the College as external students, and who have therefore met with and overcome the various difficulties which many such mature students face. These accounts mention the uncertainties of coping with a new study technique and the need to grow into the distance mode which calls for a great deal of independent study. They mention problems of isolation, pressures of studying whilst being employed, and the stress caused by possible lack of support and even some apparent obstructiveness by colleagues and employers. They warn of difficulties in obtaining textbooks and other reading matter, and the constant pressure of deadlines for submitting assignments.

However, what emerges most clearly from these papers is the motivation and determination and even ingenuity of the authors, so that graduation becomes not merely a mark of academic approval but a public acknowledgement by the College that successful external students have also proved the character of

their personal worth. They are people whom employers can be certain possess special qualities and abilities of very great value.

External study is not only a time for problems. These papers show the support of relatives and lecturers, the comradeship of residential schools, the ultimate sense of having been richly rewarded by the experience. Career advancement does not always follow graduation, but external study is a time for discovering and developing new skills and satisfactions and relationships. It may even be a time for romance.

The graduates who have written these papers studied different courses, and had different work and family environments. The high standard required may have been unexpected and residential schools somewhat expensive, but what shines through each one of them is a growing realisation that education is more about learning than about teaching. Study involves the development of learning abilities which are not restricted to academic life. As the papers show, a sense of humour may also be an asset.

We hope that the experiences of these four people will show other external students that success is earned, and graduation a deeply satisfying experience. They tell of difficulties and dodges, of virtues and vicissitudes. They prove that successful external study is indeed possible for those whose application leads them on. Reading these personal accounts there can be no member of the administrative and academic staff of Riverina College who fails to find a deep sense of happiness in having facilitated in some small way the ultimate rewarding outcome of these, our graduate friends.

Edward Reid-Smith
Editor

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THE EXTERNAL STUDENT: ONE PROFILE

by Christine Del Gigante

What price a degree? Is a degree worth the frustration, dedication, anxiety, pressure and at times indecision it causes the external student?

In retrospect the answer to the above is a very definite YES, because April 10th, 1981 made my efforts all worth while when I graduated from Riverina College of Advanced Education with a degree in Library Science.

The difficulties an external student is faced with at the onset are many, but these tend to decrease as one progresses further into the course. However, the basic starting problems are (as faced personally):

Time Lapse

Mine was not a continuing period of study. After completing my Higher School Certificate I commenced duties at Griffith Shire Library with a view to saving for an overseas holiday and in short, having a good time. The overseas trip completed and some two years passing with me as a Library Assistant made me stop and think about tertiary study - something that had never appealed earlier. Our Librarian was full of support so three other staff members and I enrolled in the Riverina College course.

We were in fact, the 'guinea pig' brigade in that we were the first students to undertake the course. This 'handicap' combined with factors like our loss of study application since finishing school and our

tiredness at the end of a day's work at the library, really did place our first two years of study very much in jeopardy.

I think probably this tiredness factor is the biggest handicap any external student is faced with. It is very, very hard to put in a day's work and then come home and apply one's self to study for three or four hours each night. This the student on-campus does not have to experience.

Friends and Social Life

One real problem in the first years of study was that we were a small minority trying to study while almost everyone else was finished with their schooling and could not see any feasible reason why someone would want to forsake a good time or an outing simply for the sake of an assignment. It took a tremendous amount of will power to refuse invitations, and in some cases the refusal was not too kindly accepted. I began to think that at this rate I might end up with a degree, but not a single friend to invite to graduation!

Textbooks

The set textbooks for the course were, in lots of instances, very hard to acquire and in many cases impossible to obtain even through Inter-Library Loan. Many a sleepless night was spent wondering if there was any chance of obtaining the text so as to be able to complete the assignment by the prescribed date.

One particular instance comes to mind early in the course, when a set text was required for the subject on methods of reading. The assignment required the text to be read, then summarised.

The library finally managed to obtain the book on Inter-Library Loan one week before the assignment was due, and all four of us had to do the assignment.

In fairness we all had the book for one night each - one night to read and comprehend a two-hundred-page book!

At the onset there was very little contact with the lecturers. It was very difficult to try and contact the desired lecturer by phone as they were usually in lectures or not available when called.

There was one aspect of the course I was bitterly disappointed in. When I enrolled I was led to believe that lecturers would frequently be visiting, if not lecturing from the College in Griffith. However, in my five years of study only two lecturers actually gave their lectures from the Study Centre, and neither of these lecturers were to do with Library Science, yet we had five Library Science students by the second year, doing the course in Griffith.

The lack of contact made with lecturers in the formative years made the course difficult in that there was no one to turn to for explanations of difficult matters or even to explain grading or marking.

If there were draw-backs to being an external student, there were also some pluses.

Comfort in Colleagues

I found an awful lot of comfort in my colleagues. The fact that the four of us were all doing the same course and having basically the same experience gave that little bit of extra incentive to carry on when the pressure of mounting overdue assignments became

most pressing. We could also use each other as sparring partners, critics and willing listeners, all fighting the same cause.

Our Chief Librarian gave us constant encouragement, helped us with our research and pulled out all stops to allow us to attend residential schools and study visits.

This made all the difference because when the chips are really down, one tends to use any excuse as a reason to virtually 'toss it in' and call it quits. She made sure that if she could help it, the exit routes were few.

The Course in Retrospect

To say that I found all subjects within the course beneficial would be untrue; however basically it was a very well-structured overall course. Some of the earlier compulsory units, did not warrant the heavy workload they required and because they came first they were a huge stumbling block for the novice student to hurdle (however, it did show early what the expected standard would be).

Coming to mind immediately was the unit on bibliographic tools, which was worth approximately one unit, but took a large amount of time and research to complete. It was good experience but a tremendous workload.

I also thought the first subject on Books and their History, although interesting and necessary, could have been condensed or incorporated into more the History of Libraries.

In fact, if I was to level a general criticism at the course on a whole, I would have to say it did lean or

had a tendency to lean, more towards the theoretical rather than practical.

However, I must clarify at this point that they were our early subjects, we were new to the course and we were probably unaware of what was actually expected of us.

This is where residential schools and study visits became a unique experience.

They were our first chance to meet our lecturers and find that they too were human, and it was our first chance to meet with the other students involved in the course and realize we were not an isolated group studying out here in Griffith and being the only ones in the world doing so.

As a result of residential schools things became much more streamlined. Students were given the addresses and contacts of other students doing the same subjects and because of the association with lecturers we became 'people' not just a student number on the receiving end of tapes.

Perseverence Equals Success

I said earlier that the course does tend to become less difficult as one progresses. Personally I found it so, but in my case my problems became less when I could share and talk them out with someone. I was very lucky as my third year brought me two 'someones' to unload my problems on.

Firstly, our Course Coordinator. When I think of the course, the hardships, the feelings of frustration at times and sometimes sheer exhaustion - I think of him and wonder how he felt. How he felt on countless occasions when all four of us would ring with problems

that seemed so great at the time, but his cool, easy manner was a calming influence on, what at times, was a hysterical student. Thanks to him.

Secondly, I did not turn every invitation down, and as it turned out I had someone to invite to graduation. I'm speaking of my husband, Tony, acquired during study. A tremendous academic himself, he became my chief critic and support. Everyone said the course will be much more difficult once you're married. How wrong they were.

A degree belongs to the person whose name it displays, a sign that the student has met with all the set requirements necessary for the course undertaken. It does not mention the constitution, drive, stamina and sweat needed to meet with the requirements or the people who stand behind the student during the long haul to the end. However, the important thing is that I know, and every other external student knows and probably will never forget the total experience.

Is a degree worth the 'price' one has to pay? Yes, it is. The sense of achievement and reward it reflects is worth every minute of the five year struggle!

Editor's comment:

You have just read something of the experiences of a student in a new course which was being developed with limited resources. Christine emphasises the great sense of isolation which may be experienced by someone who has not previously been an external student, even though in this case a group of four people were able to give each other some support. The importance of

employer's encouragement is also noted, and in Christine's case, of a newly-acquired husband too.

The failure of the inter-library loan system to supplement purchased textbooks quickly, led to the College library later building a special collection of materials for external students. However, access to a wide range of materials is a perennial problem for students, and not everyone is able to be as fortunate as Robert Landow tells us in his paper later on. Although problems with purchased textbooks still exist (many have to be imported from overseas, and publishers' agents in Australia may have difficulties in obtaining new editions on schedule or holding sufficient stocks for next year's unknown students), the University Co-operative Bookshop is now able to satisfy more needs than in the early 1970's.

Christine's disappointment in academic staff not visiting her hometown reflects the financial restrictions, and the consequent impossibility of peripatetic lecturers seeing their students more frequently. (In fact, the Griffith Study Centre is now used only for continuing education activities.) The importance of residential schools as a psychological support system becomes apparent.

Christine's perseverence and hard work (with support from family and friends) carried her through, and the personal characteristics brought out by the course doubtless impressed the selection committee which appointed her to the post of Chief Librarian when her superior retired.

MANAGING LIFE AS AN EXTERNAL STUDENT

by Robert Landow

IN THE BEGINNING -
Darkness became Light!

Prior to enrolment in External Studies, my future prospects looked obscure: a drop in salary was imminent, in line with a transfer, and I wanted to apply for a scholarship, but lacked degree qualifications.

I was also reminded of a recorded lecture by Dr Murray Banks, an eminent American psychologist/humourist. He was speaking to a recently-retired 60 year old lady who expressed that her lifetime ambition was to be a comptroller, which entailed a three year course.

He asked her, 'How old will you be if you do the course?'

'Sixty-three,' she replied.

He then asked, 'How old will you be if you don't do the course?'

I believe she is now busy 'comptrolling'!

Similarly, I was determined to gain a scholarship, to increase my family's financial security and, as an added bonus, to improve my future employment prospects in as short a time as possible.

However, any such major modification of lifestyle can be undertaken only with the full backing of one's family, and, in my case, this included the extended

family (my parents). We agreed, at a family conference, that my social activities would be substituted for study time - after all, it would only be for three years! We also agreed that quality of time was far more important than quantity of time: our occasional outings emphasised family activities. When I needed time to myself, my wife and/or parents always seemed to have something planned for the children.

The course became a family undertaking.

THEN THERE WAS MORE LIGHT -
and the Power Bill Skyrocketted!

Doing a course is like trying to throw a ball with one's 'unnatural' hand: the more practice and the higher the goals, the better the achievement.

Encompassed in this, is that the first assignment is the hardest - and each new semester proved this! I lost count of the excuses, e.g. weeding the lawn, fixing a non-leaking tap, changing the baby's dry nappy, etc., that I used to postpone my first assignment. However, once I had actually started to practise the skill of assignment writing, the assignment drafts became fewer and the flow of thoughts became clearer.

Also, I strived for an 'A' grade in each subject: if I achieved it, I was ecstatic - but if I missed, I still had 'two bites of the cherry' left to gain a pass. How many 'bites' were left if a 'C' was my aim and I just missed it? With high marks, the pressures of 'pass/fail' on the final exam or assignment were alleviated.

CUTTING CORNERS -
Instead of Paper Dolls!

With speed of completion being of the essence, I endeavoured to obtain as much Advanced Standing (Exemptions) and selected as many compatible subjects as possible.

Advanced Standing, or Exemptions, means that the College does not require a student to repeat work or courses that have been successfully completed, in most cases, within the last ten years. For instance, I was required to do a subject closely related to a variety of work in which I had been involved, i.e. Diabetic Camps, working in Psychiatric Hospitals, lecturing at Sport and Recreation camps, etc. I wrote away to the relevant organisations, gathered piles of documentation for my case and 'phoned the lecturer to discuss my intentions. It was then that I realised I had completed the requirements for <u>two</u> subjects! Documentation of one's case is the most important aspect when applying for exemptions.

Apart from a few internal College policies on courses, I found that the Life Management Course, as with many others, was logically and sensibly constructed: many areas overlap and most subjects reinforce the value of others. Hence, the information given and gained in Law would be useful in Consumer Affairs, Sociology of Marriage, etc. When I realised just how compatible the subjects were, study time was drastically reduced: I would spend a day in the library with four pads (one for each subject) and, as information was found, it was transferred onto the relevant pad - prior to this I would spend a frustrating day on just one subject!

RESOURCES -
a Challenge to the Imagination

Frustration had set in: the local library had very few books; particularly on Law. I gave up and went to the local club to 'drown my sorrows'. Whilst there, I started a conversation with a local businessman who, in turn, introduced me to the local solicitor. For the price of a beer, I soon had access to his firm's extensive library and the offer of one of his juniors to tutor me!

From that point on, I realised that the list of resources was only limited by my imagination and courage to ask for assistance. For instance, doctors and science teachers (biology), accountants (accountancy), businessmen (administration), school counsellors (psychology), neighbours (food management, consumer affairs) - the list is endless!

The telephone was another invaluable resource when specific information was required and/or it could not be otherwise obtained. For instance, my wife, who greatly assisted in chasing up information for assignments, had to pretend to be a prospective client for those in the funeral business to freely converse about their prices, services, etc. Unfortunately, my mother, who was suffering from Shingles at that time, overheard the conversation and thought her days were numbered!

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL, THE BAR -
and Seeing Double . . . Value, That Is!

At residential schools, the lecturers have to cram a semester's work into a very brief period. In the course of the lectures, I found that listening, questioning and note-taking provided most of the information I needed for the subject - even to the

extent of the type of information required for the final exam!

In many cases, the lecturers were as anxious to meet the real students (as opposed to a name and number) just as much as the students wanted to meet the 'scribbler' on their assignments. Time was always found to have an informal chat with the lecturers or seek their advice on matters of resources, expectations, problems encountered with the subject. After implementing their suggestions, I would include a very brief letter in my assignments outlining the results of their ideas.

Time was also taken to meet the External Studies Administrative Staff, i.e. the Student Liaison Officer, Accommodation and the 'Pink slip' ladies (the cooks!). Apart from having the best of food, I was saved from sleeping in a tent and having to withdraw from all subjects (in both cases the appropriate posted form had not arrived!). A personal call to the Administration section and they obligingly cleared up both matters.

Residential schools are also a bringing together of students - a time to get to know others who may share your trials and tribulations. The best place to meet the other students is at the Bar.

From this meeting place developed:

(a) An External Studies telephone network used by students to keep in contact with each other, as a means of understanding assignment requirements and, most importantly, as a 'buddy' system to keep each other going.

(b) Study meetings - where we would travel to a central location and share resources and talents. These ranged from a day in Sydney studying 'The

Plastic Woman' to a family barbecue at Woy Woy where our spouses cooked whilst we worked on a major assignment.

(c) Resource pooling - we would each bring our gathered resources to residential school, adjourn to the College library, find more resources and then photocopy each other's notes. This effectively meant that we each had resources from all over the State!

(d) Textbook sharing - we borrowed textbooks from completed subjects.

(e) Subject and lecturer information - each subject was unique in its presentation and assignment requirements, e.g. in Administration one can only present the views expressed by researchers (I once gave 27 references in a 600 word assignment!) yet Psychology demanded the student's own views. Former students were invaluable in helping to discover the appropriate assignment style for each subject.

(f) Records of assignments - we originally sent copies of recently completed assignments to stir each other into action. However, we soon realised that if an assignment went missing, a copy was readily available.

Perhaps it was coincidental, but at each residential school I would see the same faces at the Bar. Those who were only seen at lectures, seemed to disappear!

GIVING THE COURSE UP -
the Flame Flickers

The times I felt like simply 'giving up' occurred quite frequently. The reasons for feeling this way

were varied but, in retrospect, it was the timing that was the real issue.

(a) The start of semester - as frustration set in with the first few assignments, so did the excuses for not doing them and not doing the course! It took a quiet weekend and/or a sick day to force myself to do a draft. Once the draft was completed, a feeling of achievement and satisfaction overtook frustration.

(b) The pile up - when a dilemma occurs over the disruption of a great social life to complete some assignments that are due: it is difficult to say 'no' at times. There is no easy way out; but consider this - a semester's duration is 16 weeks, subtract three weeks for notes to arrive, etc. Multiply this by the two semesters and one realises that there is only six months of study and a whole six months of socialisation!

(c) Illness of family or self can either create a pile-up or irrational thinking. When our baby contracted hepatitis I initially blamed the course - 'if only I wasn't doing the course . . .' Fortunately my wife placed things into their proper perspective and I phoned the Student Liaison Officer to explain my predicament. The lecturers were so understanding that some sent letters wishing our baby a speedy recovery!

(d) Demoralisation can occur when a great deal of effort is rewarded by failure. I can recall quite a few students who scored highly in most subjects yet withdrew when they continually failed in only one stream of subjects.

Perhaps the strongest factor which kept me continuing was the determination that all the late nights, hard work and family sacrifices were not going to be

wasted. I wanted them to have a meaning: the completion of the degree and its subsequent rewards.

IT'S ALL OVER -
Not with a Bang, but a Whimper!

The completion of the course is an exercise in patience: waiting for results, waiting for graduation, waiting for the employer to adjust status and pay and waiting for money to complete those 1001 jobs that plagued me whilst studying.

There is a feeling that a vacuum is left in the night and on weekends. Television viewing, particularly cricket, helped in filling those empty times, yet the same satisfaction as completing an assignment was missing.

I have been fortunate as every subject, with the exception of the Biology strand, has proven its worth to people in this community and to me, personally. The following are just a few examples:

(a) Consumer Affairs and Design - the renovation of my house.

(b) Consumer Affairs and Law - helping a pensioner couple to have their two-year old TV repaired for $17 (not $170 as was originally quoted!).

(c) Sociology and Law - helping and advising a friend whose marriage had broken down.

(d) Psychology and Life Management - used extensively in teaching, I now feel a more competent, professional teacher.

(e) Economics and Consumer Affairs - how to invest and spend all the generous increase in pay as a result of completing the course!!!

The list of examples is endless and I would need to devote another paper on the everyday usefulness of the Life Management Course.

The outcomes of my initial goals were mixed. I have now reached the maximum salary paid to a classroom teacher, the overseas scholarship has been postponed (or may have to be scrapped) as I was advised that I would have little chance of retaining a position near our elderly parents and my future employment prospects have not, as yet been tested - however, I do know of one elderly student who, on completion of the Life Management Course, successfully launched himself into an entirely new career in Business Management.

Like many other graduates, I have been richly rewarded, both personally and professionally, by the decision to spend three years of my life undertaking the Life Management B.A. Course. One might say that the benefits will last for the term of my natural life!

Editor's comment:

I chose the phrase "managing life" in the title of Robert's paper because for me it sums up his approach to being an external student (the sub-titles are all his) as well as indicating his degree course. Robert, like John, decided on a high standard so that if he fell short he would still pass each subject comfortably. Cutting corners and hunting up resources in seemingly unlikely places became part of his management techniques. He documented previous experience in order to shorten the course by gaining exemptions from subjects. He organised his study periods by realising that the subjects should be integrated, and not viewed as independent units.

One important point is that other people form an invaluable resource, and that students should not restrict themselves to whatever happens to be available in the local library. Other people have specialist knowledge which they are willing to share, and books which they are happy to lend. Data gathering may be done by others, providing the analysis and synthesis are done by the student. Residential schools can be a time for ensuring familiarity with lecturers' expectations and the administration's supportive services.

Robert also lived in the city and so was able to participate more in study group activities, but he also saw the need to initiate these. His is another success story which stresses determination, and a realisation that withdrawing from study is not necessarily the only or best action when problems confront the external student. The College cannot always solve students' problems, but contacting staff early can usually result in the lessening of pressures.

THE COMPUTERISED STUDENT

by John Chant

Completely unexpectedly I received an invitation to offer my personal account of correspondence study at Riverina College. I am grateful to the Editor for the opportunity to express my feelings, and to pay due respect to the many people who helped me achieve my goal. I trust this brief expression of my experience will help future students realise that the battle can be won and that benefits can accrue to all concerned.

If this exposé tends in part to sound emotional, please bear with a grateful and indebted ex-student who finds the recollection of events inspires humility.

I had been a clerk with my organisation for about fifteen years when, in 1978, they decided to buy a computer. There was not anyone in the local administration who knew how to program computers, and I saw an opportunity to further my career prospects.

When I started looking for a college correspondence course to undertake, I found that the only suitable subject available at a college near me was the introductory computing subject which formed part of the Associate Diploma in Administration through the Riverina College.

I enrolled in that course with the object of simply completing the one subject. With only one subject to study and the inner drive generated by possible career enhancement, I completed the subject easily in Autumn 1978.

After that I retreated from study until in 1980. As we were developing our Accounting systems and looked to be extending to other country branches, I realised that if I was to make the most of my opportunity, I should complete the remaining subjects of the newly-introduced Associate Diploma in Computing. I had fears that my employer would decide to call for a computer manager for the country, and might appoint some fresh-faced science graduate to start telling me what to do, unless I had some formal qualification to fit me for the position. My own pride in my ability would not allow this without at least my trying. I therefore committed myself mentally to completing the course. I further committed myself to try to the best of my ability to gain the highest marks I could. This commitment never lagged as I progressed through the course.

A Fresh Start

When I started in 1980 I was in my mid-thirties, had not studied since 1969 and had a wife and three children. The pressures that concentrated correspondence study places on your family are immense. My children's ages ranged from four to thirteen years, and anyone in a similar state will be aware of the seemingly endless demands for attention and action that young children make on parents. And they are entitled to the active participation of both their parents in their growing up. Fortunately my darling wife recognised my ambition to succeed, and strongly supported me through the study period. She adopted those parts of the father role I was unable to fulfil through my physical and mental absences.

My children accepted that I had to study hard to achieve my goal and they helped by keeping quiet and by recognising that for some of the time they must help, by putting Dad's needs ahead of their own. I

have the feeling that as my results were released, and they were mostly good, my children realised that hard work and commitment can contribute to better marks. I sincerely hope that the period when I was so engrossed in my work of study has not alienated me from them.

Because of the regular nine-to-five hours I worked, it was not so difficult to program my study into the week, except of course that there were only just enough hours in most weeks and definitely not enough in some.

In my opinion the success or failure of a correspondence student can be directly related to his ability to set a study program for himself that is demanding yet achievable, and to stay within the program. It is critical, when studying more than one subject at a time, for the studies to be properly integrated. I made a habit of setting down my study goals at the start of each semester on a weekly basis for the whole semester. I found that the outline provided by the tutors was a good starting point. In application I drove myself harder than normal in the first two or three weeks to get one week ahead of my program. This gave greater opportunity for revision at semester's end, but more often than not allowed for the many unforeseen dramas that appear within the semester to be tackled without the nagging thought that I was getting behind in my study program.

I was encouraged by my work supervisor to continue. He was always interested in projects or problems. He shared my elation at gaining good passes. My employer provided me with paid time-off to attend the compulsory residential schools and for this I was thankful.

The effect that my initiative had on my career was marked. When senior management found out that I had started studying, they seconded me to help get the

computerised systems going. This eventually led to them creating a full-time position for me organising the computer installation. This was a significant boost to my morale and provided an encouragement for me to keep trying. As well, they realised the additional benefits they were getting from my increased knowledge and rewarded me with salary increases. This additional recognition once again increased my motivation and was seen by my family as due reward for effort.

Theory into Practice

The course itself had its moments. I found that the subjects presented provided a good experience of the topics required. The course is classified as UG3. When I first started I was not aware what this meant. A few of my colleagues were apprehensive about its value in employment because of its low status. I needed a course to get me acquainted with computers, teach me proper programming techniques and languages and give me a broad view of the events in the world of computing.

The course most certainly did that, without undue technicality. I truly believe that the course will provide useful practitioners of the art. Graduates, if they work at the subjects and have average intelligence will learn what the equipment can and can not do, and how to make them work in a simple but structured method.

I do not feel that the course left me wanting more from it. I has, in fact, produced in me a desire to further my studies in other fields.

My troubles were few because I learned to expect and anticipate them and provide alternatives to counteract

them before they became dramatic. Perhaps my age and work experience was of help.

Do not misunderstand me. There is every opportunity for every possible drama to occur; always remember Murphy's Law.

In my experience, the greatest problems were brought on because the College year is divided into two semesters of about fifteen intense weeks each, with little allowance for time lost through late arrival of notes and lecture material, unavailability of texts and slow turnaround time for assignments.

Problems will arise for us all. Fortunately the tutors are human and if you keep in contact with them they will help you through. I pestered my tutors for notes, for text lists and for further explanations. I was fortunate to be only one hundred and thirty kilometres away and spent some time on the phone to them. I often bought my texts in the semester before I needed them, even to the extent of writing to publishers to get them early, so I could spread my study over a longer period. I was not prepared to restrict my study to thirty weeks per year. Unfortunately when new tutors introduce different texts this can lead to extra expense, but I felt, for this course, it made the job that much easier.

Meanwhile, Back on Campus

The high-point of this production-oriented course was the residential schools. There was an anticipation of results, the strong psychological build-up to a five day school is invigorating. The opportunity to rise at 6.30 to 7 am and hack an hour's work before showering and having breakfast. Working in the terminal room from 9 am to 10 pm, breaking only long enough to eat and refresh your completely addled mind.

Rushing from lectures to get on one of the faster terminals and at day's end to arrive at the Union building to find it was shut or there was only time for one or two 'tonics' before trying to sleep and not think about the next day of the same . . . perhaps invigorating is not the right word, but it certainly is different, and the anticipation of productive results provided me with the impetus needed to persevere.

I was disappointed that so many of my colleagues arrived at residential school obviously unprepared and unwilling to extend themselves. This lack of self-drive, in my opinion, contributes greatly to the dropout rates.

My lasting experience of my correspondence study will always be that I owe my family a debt of gratitude for their patience and support. Without their support I may have failed to achieve my goal.

I could not complete my article without thanking my lecturers, whose lives I have helped disturb over the last three years, for their dedication to helping us students. To my fellow students, the staff of the Computer Centre, and the many friends I have made through the course, my best wishes and thanks. To all Riverina College students, and particularly the newer ones I hope your experiences are as useful and memorable for you as mine have been for me.

Editor's comment:

John is a person whose motivation to study this particular course is obvious to all, and this motivation may well be the key to success for many students. He saw the need to respond to his changing work environment (i.e. the acquisition of a computer by his organisation), and decided to take an introductory subject. A couple of years later he saw the need for a full qualification, and committed himself not only to passing but to gaining the highest marks possible.

His family fully supported him in his hard study, and he himself attributes much of his success to this and to the active interest of his employer. John paid great attention to preliminary planning, setting a high but realistic target given his environment and personality.

Christine found her course somewhat too theoretical, which is a problem where first degrees are deliberately designed to lay foundations for further and more specialised study. (Furthermore, the professional content had to be less than half of the total course.) John found his associate diploma course to be geared solely to the practical problems of computing, and of immediate applicability in his work. Although the "status" of the award concerned his colleagues its real value could be seen in his daily work.

John's planning included not restricting his study time to the official semesters and he made full use of the facilities at residential school. In his opinion, lack of self-drive "contributes greatly to the dropout rates".

THE RIGHT TO STUDY

by Coral Davidson

My decision to take an external course was made one hot Saturday afternoon as I browsed through the Sydney Morning Herald. The advertisement for external courses at Riverina CAE reminded me that it was time I did 'something' and as the closing date was the next week my mind was made up before I could talk myself out of it. For some time I had been casually considering doing a course of study, but had not even thought too seriously of its nature or content. My daughter was close to high school age and I was beginning to feel some concern for her motivation to work in the relaxed atmosphere, centred on TV, that existed in our house of an evening. I thought that if she could see that such indulgences were resisted by an adult who did not have to study, then there must be a lot more to knowledge than what appears in high school homework.

This is of course the prime reason I was able to persevere. At all times I was conscious that a lapse on my part would not only result in her loss of faith but also prohibit me from ever critizing her or her brother for their lack of application.

At the time of commencing the course I was 39 years of age, with two primary school children and a position as a Science Assistant in a local high school. My previous education had been the NSW Leaving Certificate followed by a Chemistry Certificate course at Sydney Technical College. I had worked on and off between children, mainly at night, working in industry

and universities. There had been no chance to do any catching up due to my domestic situation.

My family were mildly amused but reasonably supportive when I announced my decision to study. My in-laws and the staff at my school were not. Some teachers were antagonistic to my having even been permitted to enrol, and my principal and the science master both considered it was a waste of time. The in-laws were convinced I would be quite unequal to the task (and that is the second reason I succeeded).

Workplace opposition became probably my greatest problem. (The irony of a situation in which an educational institution so viciously opposed education still intrigues me though the psychology and sociology I was soon to study was certainly able to allow me to comprehend their reaction.) I was not allowed to borrow books from the school library - they were only for pupils or teachers. A departmental instruction which informed ancillary staff that leave would not be given for study purposes was not shown directly to me but interpreted by a superior officer as meaning ancillary staff are not permitted to study courses and then conveyed to me in that form.

Finding Ways Round Obstacles

This study leave problem was quite a challenge, especially when exams were set to be taken at very specific times. On three occasions I was able to obtain the examiner's permission to start early (and finish just as everyone else was beginning). To the lecturers who gave such a concession I was extremely grateful. On other occasions I had to disappear from sight on school 'shopping' trips or take time off for 'personal family reasons' and work longer hours to make it up. I certainly looked with considerable envy

at studying teachers who were allowed full days to do two-hour exams.

Fortunately I did not have to work school holidays, and while I was at RCAE residential schools were held only during NSW vacations. Without this coincidence I would certainly not have been able to finish my course. In fact so intense was the school feeling against my activity it was only the lucky (?) breaking of my son's leg that enabled me to attend the graduation ceremony. The principal was, in fact, very understanding of such domestic problems.

Residentials of course presented other difficulties. Child supervision was one. My husband's holidays were taken at Christmas closedown and I had no relatives of my own in close proximity to Sydney. My in-laws were not of course predisposed to helping. I solved the problem with the cooperation of the NSW Railways - my children were dispatched, not unlike parcels, to visit distant towns around the state. They visited local historical museums, took photographs and kept scrap books. They learnt to read timetables, make STD calls from public phones, book into motels and tell convincing stories to inquiring authorities. They would drop in to the College at intervals, sleeping the night on an inflatable mattress in my room and perhaps spend a day trying to catch the lambs in the College paddocks.

We purchased the special Nurail tickets which gave unlimited travel for 14 days and they learnt to buy food in supermarkets and eat it in parks and railway stations. They learnt to depend upon themselves - and a lot of NSW history and geography. Not surprisingly both studied geography at 3-unit level and are now taking tertiary studies related to such areas.

Study in Various Places

For myself I usually disliked the on-campus periods. I was away from my home, the beds were uncomfortable, and I knew a pile of laundry was accumulating at home. Science subjects were perhaps the most traumatic as the practical work was generally unfamiliar and time very limited. I prepared as well as possible, made sure I had my own supply of matches, marking pens, labels, etc. and anything I could lay my hands on that might have been in short supply. I then proceeded to make as much contact with the laboratory attendants who were considerably helpful to one of their own. Anyone who overlooks the help they can give is naive to say the least.

This is not to say that I feel residential schools were unrewarding. They were not, and I met many different people who brought new experiences to my existence. But from the point of view of academic progress I usually found I was better off remaining at home and working out my own ideas. I sometimes felt that residential schools were being run only to meet a necessary condition of the course, not to bring more understanding of the content.

Living in Sydney the library access is not as bad as it would be for many isolated students. Time though, was limited for me - I live on the perimeter of the city and finish work too late to go very far. Most of my library research was done on Saturdays. The libraries I found most accessible, and informative, were the TAFE library in Harris Street, the Sydney University Law Library in the city, and the council libraries at North Sydney anbd Cabramatta. When I consider now the value of the course I did, I realise that it is the skills I learned and the knowledge and understanding I gained rather than in the award I received. (I never thought I would be able to say that - I thought the achievement was the degree.)

My career has not prospered and the school staff have no more respect for my qualifications than before. I have applied for several other positions but have only received one interview at which I was rejected for lack of experience. Probably my age and domestic background mean that I will now see little chance of career advancement.

Nevertheless I do in no way regret the use of six years spare time on the course. I succeeded in my objective which was to convince my children of the worth of study. And certainly the experience cannot have been too bad for I am now enrolled in another external-mode course at Mitchell CAE.

Editor's comment:

Support from family, friends and colleagues is believed to be a significant factor in success for an external student, and this is emphasised by the other three graduates whose papers appear in this pamphlet. Coral proves the exception in that her inspiring success came in face of a singular lack of interest and help from colleagues. Indeed, one suspects that this not only inspired her to complete her bachelor's degree course with distinction, but encouraged her subsequently to enrol in a further course at a sister institution.

In a letter to the Editor she wrote: "I felt that it may be reassuring to a commencing student that not all who attempt (and finish) such courses are remote, intellectual misfits. Average housewives with concerns about domestic trivia can also get there." A determination to set an example to her children also

helped her to persevere when times were tough, as they are indeed for every external student at some time or other. Here the help of College staff is always readily available, as all four authors have appreciated.

Coral also shows the same kind of initiative as does Robert Landow in overcoming obstacles, and a positive attitude to finding ways to do things (rather than bemoaning the everpresent difficulties) is obviously an important attribute for success. (An unlooked for spinoff is that both of her children are now taking geography/history related studies at tertiary institutions, which is a reminder that what we do can have a considerable impact on others.)

She did not find the satisfaction in residential schools which the others did, nor did she have special difficulty in access to libraries. Both of these probably reflect the fact that she was not geographically isolated, though one can certainly be isolated in a big city. Material rewards have not come Coral's way, but the course most certainly reinforced the determined personality for this "average housewife".

* * * * *

These four graduates sound exceptional people, but in many ways they are typical of the successful external student. Motivation, determination, planning, resource-seeking, and full utilisation of College staff all played their parts.

Occasional Papers Series

1. Results of a survey of residential schools held by Riverina College September 1980, by Edward R. Reid-Smith. (1981)

2. Action in external studies, by Staff of Riverina College. (1982)

3. In preparation.

4. The experience of external studies, by Graduates of Riverina College. (1983)